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SUBJECT: YEREVAN REACTION TO KOCHARIAN'S JUNE 24 COUNCIL OF EUROPE SPEECH

1. (U) Sensitive But Unclassified. Please treat accordingly.

SUMMARY

2. (SBU) Local media reaction was mostly positive in Yerevan following President Robert Kocharian's June 24 address to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). The address, which was covered widely by all local media outlets, inspired a flurry of formal and informal commentary among GOAM representatives, analysts and international missions. Kocharian supporters within the GOAM were enthusiastic about the speech and told Post that it was a "triumph" in response to the opposition's recent criticism of Kocharian at PACE. As expected, Armenian opposition leaders sharply criticized the speech, particularly Kocharian's description of the GOAM's response to recent opposition activity. Supporters and critics alike, however, reacted positively to Kocharian's comments regarding Nagorno-Karabakh and the uncharacteristically nostalgic tone of his speech. End summary.

PRESS REPORTS GENERALLY POSITIVE

3. (SBU) After considerable speculation in editorial pages the preceding week, local media response to Kocharian's June 24 speech was generally positive. Two days before the speech, Yerevan daily "Haykakan Zhamanak" coyly predicted that Kocharian might falter in Strasbourg when faced with hostile questions from the Azeri and Turkish delegations. Following the speech, however, the same newspaper reported that Kocharian gave a strong performance and congratulated his ability to "present Armenia in the best possible light." For the most part, local media did not draw connections between Kocharian's speech and the Council of Europe's resolution on Armenia. Instead, coverage concentrated on Kocharian's comments regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Initial press reports interpreted his statements as a new approach for Kocharian, signaling a more "helpful" GOAM posture on the N-K issue.

GOAM SUPPORTERS APPLAUD KOCHARIAN'S "FORCEFUL DELIVERY"

4. (SBU) Kocharian supporters within the GOAM were enthusiastic about the speech and told Post that it was a "triumphant" response to the opposition's recent criticism of Kocharian at PACE. MFA contacts told us they were pleasantly surprised by his forceful delivery and were hopeful that it would counteract any negative impressions of the GOAM resulting from opposition parliamentarians' March-April speeches. The speech appeared to exceed the expectations of some within the GOAM who earlier predicted Kocharian might use the opportunity to aggressively discredit the opposition during his address.

CRITICISM FROM OPPOSITION BUT POSITIVE TAKE ON N-K COMMENTS

5. (SBU) While not overly negative, opposition leaders were quick to criticize Kocharian's speech. Speaking from Strasbourg, National Accord Party Chairman Artashes Geghamian classified Kocharian's analysis of domestic political developments in Armenia as "distorted." Opposition Justice Bloc leader Stepan Demirchian told us he was annoyed by Kocharian's defense of the GOAM's response to the opposition rally of April 12-13 and predicted that these comments would later hurt the President. National Democratic Union Chairman Vazgen Manukian described Kocharian's address as "mediocre" and said it was confirmation that Kocharian would never be able to rise above his perceived "role as a battalion commander." Geghamian and others within the opposition, however, reacted

favorably to Kocharian's comments on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Geghamian congratulated Kocharian for making specific mention of the Paris and Key West principles. He added, however, that Kocharian's commitment to the issue would be better perceived were he to make similar comments in Yerevan rather than in Strasbourg. The issue of a joint opposition statement in response to Kocharian's address is reportedly first on the June 30 agenda of a meeting of the leaders of the Justice Bloc and The National Accord Party.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) While still early, Kocharian's speech was not initially the lightning rod for local criticism many observers had predicted. Local media coverage of the speech, together with unexpectedly positive reactions by opposition leaders in response to Kocharian's N-K comments, have clearly provided a boost of confidence for his supporters. In contrast to his traditionally restrained public posture, Kocharian's personal tone during the question and answer period appears to have struck a nostalgic chord -- at least for now -- with a number of Armenians across party lines.

ORDWAY